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AUTHOR Sonka, Amy L.
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ABSTRACT

A thirty-hour skills-based reading program was designed for beginning-level ESL (English as a second language) students in the intensive English language program at Boston University. Reading was included as an essential component in the low-level college-preparatory ESL class for several reasons: (1) reading instruction and practice begin to prepare students for academic course work; (2) they give students a chance to work with comparatively sophisticated materials based on content related to their academic interests; and (3) they serve to integrate a variety of language activities. The reading program is organized to include intensive and extensive reading, exercises to improve speed and comprehension, and materials designed to develop general reading skills, as well as skills for reading different types of materials. Five exercises are presented to demonstrate the kind of skills-based reading exercises that can be written for the low-level student. The sample exercises which focus on comprehension of general ideas and specific facts include: identifying general topics, matching facts to general topics, adding facts to paragraphs, matching topic sentences to paragraphs, and outlining. Finally, five variables in reading comprehension tests are described. These variables are manipulated to create a variety of conditions under which reading comprehension is tested. (Author/CFM)

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READING HAS TO BE TAUGHT TOO¹

Amy L. Sonka

Boston University

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When a thirty-hour course in reading and study skills was proposed for the students in the intensive English language program at Boston University, the general opinion was that the beginning-level students would not be able to take advantage of such a course because they lacked sufficient language competence. The following ideas and materials are a selection of those which emerged in response to the challenge to create an effective reading course for beginning students.

Why Teach Reading?

Reading must be considered an essential component of a college-preparatory English language program even if curriculum planners look only to the value reading skills will have for the student when he is eventually in academic university courses. There are further reasons, however, to recommend giving reading a more central place in the low-level ESL class. First, students can usually perform at a higher level in reading than in other skills. They can understand quite accurately written materials which they are still not prepared to discuss orally or in writing with equivalent accuracy or thoroughness. In particular, they generally experience little difficulty reading materials which include grammatical structures with which they may not yet be familiar. Students

¹

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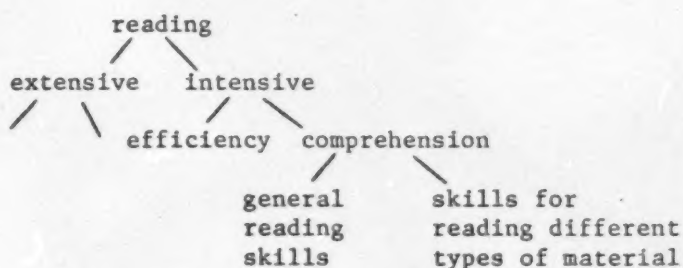
clearly enjoy their success with these comparatively sophisticated materials.

Second, although survival skills are of unquestionable value to the foreign student preparing to study in the U.S., he may begin to feel that his ESL program is not being responsive to his needs in light of his goal which is, after all, to enter an American university. This complaint may be especially strong with the beginning student who sees his goal as so distant that he worries about not attaining it. However, when the content of the materials chosen for the reading program is somehow related to academic course materials, the student's felt need for significant content is easily satisfied.

Finally, reading is a service skill. Although we may read fiction for pleasure, we often read non-fiction with an eye to performing some other task; that is, the point of getting information and ideas is to use them. Reading thereby serves to integrate a variety of language activities as demonstrated below.

Organizing a Reading Program

The schema presented here shows the various aspects of reading which provide guidelines for organizing the reading program.



We have found that a program loses effectiveness by not including both intensive and extensive reading. Intensive reading refers to the kind of

work done in the reading class. It is also the kind of careful work a student may do when studying for an exam. For optimal concentration, intensive reading should not be done for more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time. Therefore, lessons are planned so that intensive silent reading is alternated with a variety of reading-related activities. In addition, the student should be encouraged to read extensively outside of class; that is, he spends a half hour in the evening with something he chooses to read (a magazine, short story, or text). At this time he reads, not to remember details for an exam, but for general information and ideas as well as for pleasure. Hopefully he will become so absorbed in the material that he actually loses awareness of the fact that he is reading.

Extensive and intensive reading have two major components: efficiency and comprehension. I choose the word efficiency because the word speed often evokes a negative reaction from beginning students. They complain about being asked to race through material without understanding a word. We are actually concerned with reading speed only because it tends to make a student read more efficiently: he manages to understand more material in less time. A good reader does not read one word, stop, think, check his dictionary, and then move on to the next word; by the time he reached the end of a sentence he would not only have lost sight of the beginning but also of the meaning of the sentence. In addition, students have to realize that there can be a tremendous amount of required reading in an American university course. The average untrained adult reader reads 225-250 words per minute; however, a college student probably needs somewhere between 450 and 600 wpm, or one page a minute. Most of our students were reading between 100 and 200 wpm on simplified ESL materials.

There are various techniques for helping students increase their reading efficiency. As the materials included here focus on comprehension, I will mention only that good reading habits which relate to rate can and should be taught and practiced like any other skill. It makes no sense to ask students to do something faster which they cannot do at all. Rather, efficient reading is taught as a skill which is developed over time.

Comprehension skills, the other major aspect of the reading program, can be divided into general reading skills and skills for reading particular kinds of materials. An efficient reader is able to recognize and use the organization of a passage. Understanding the organization provides the reader with a rough mental outline which he then completes by reading. It gives him a basis for anticipating what follows, and thus establishes the appropriate mental set for understanding and assimilating new material.

The reading program for the low-level students included materials and exercises designed to use basic forms of organization: chronological order, process, comparison and contrast, generalizations and examples. The general reading skills which formed the core of our program included: reading for the general idea, reading for specific facts, reading carefully, and scanning. A sample of the materials designed for the former two skills follows.

Techniques for Teaching and Practicing Comprehension of General Ideas and Specific Facts

In general, good comprehension means recognizing and understanding general ideas and specific facts and seeing how these ideas and facts are organized and developed. Several kinds of exercises were developed to

introduce the students to these aspects of comprehension. Exercises were done with a variety of reading selections but, to save space, all of the exercises reproduced here refer to a single article. (See Appendix) It is important for students to apply learned skills to new material and often an exercise has an impact only if it is done on unfamiliar material.

We begin every reading class by asking the students to number the paragraphs of the article we will be studying that day. Although this could be done before the reading is reproduced for class use, it is better to have the students actively delineate the paragraphs. It calls their attention to the fact that articles are written in discrete paragraphs, and that they will be concerned with understanding paragraphs, not individual words or sentences. It also gives reference points for the subsequent activities.

Next, students are asked to underline the first sentence of each paragraph. In 80 to 90% of non-fiction writing, the topic sentence of a paragraph is the first sentence. As the class reads each of these underlined sentences, the teacher elicits from them what they think the paragraph will be about. These guesses are recorded and later confirmed when the entire article has been studied. Students who are amazed to see that almost all of their guesses are correct eventually learn to rely on the introductory sentence of a paragraph. As noted above, anticipation facilitates both reading efficiency and comprehension.

Exercise I. GENERAL TOPICS

_____ Fish

_____ Corn in North America

_____ Conclusion

_____ Rice

_____ Introduction

_____ Other plants

_____ Wheat

_____ Animals

_____ Corn in South America

When preparing materials at the beginning level, it is preferable to concentrate on the topic or topic sentence of a paragraph rather than the general idea because general ideas are more difficult for students to formulate. In addition, asking students to give the main idea of a paragraph may be requiring them to practice a skill which they do not yet have. The beginning point, therefore, should be a list of general topics (Exercise I) which the student then has to match to the correct paragraph of the reading. If, as in the article included here, the paragraphs clearly deal with distinct subjects, the idea that each paragraph is centered around one topic becomes clear.

Exercise II. MATCHING FACTS TO GENERAL TOPICS

- _____ Asia grows more rice than any other part of the world.
- _____ The climate of the Netherlands grows fine grass for dairy cattle.
- _____ Apples grow best in a cool climate.
- _____ Denmark must buy grain to feed its hogs and cattle.
- _____ The animals of the Midwest eat more corn than the people.
- _____ Unless the corn crop has been a good one, many of the people will be hungry in the winter.

(Etc.)

Once the student has read the entire selection paragraph by paragraph and has determined the topic of each paragraph, it is important to give him an opportunity to use the concept that each paragraph has a general topic. Knowing the general topic should help a student, before he reads, to anticipate what kind of information he will find, and after he reads, to remember what information was included in the paragraph. In the next step, then, the student is given a list of facts (Exercise II) which he has to match to the

general topics without referring to the original. The student indicates in which paragraph he thinks he will find each fact. He can easily check his own work with the original and, whether the correction and feedback is individual or group, the student should be able to give reasons for his answers. This exercise can be done with the topics (matching the facts in Exercise II with the topics listed in Exercise I) or later with the topic sentences (matching the facts to the sentences given in Exercise IV). It can be done after the entire selection has been read or as a pre-reading exercise in anticipating content.

Exercise III. ADDING FACTS

- _____ Lobster is a popular fish caught off the shores of New England.
- _____ Oranges are grown in warm areas all over the world.
- _____ Indians use corn to make bread, pudding, and a cereal for breakfast.
- _____ Goat meat and lamb are commonly eaten in countries such as Greece that do not produce grain.

(Etc.)

Another exercise using the general topic of a paragraph is based on a list of facts which might have appeared in the original (Exercise III). In order to add the new facts to the appropriate paragraph of the original, students must use the entire reading, noting the implications of the general topic of each paragraph and trying to determine which category the new facts belong to.

Exercise IV. TOPIC SENTENCES

- a) Many of the world's great food-producing regions give us fish.
- b) Wheat is another important grain.

- c) Although the world's population depends on rice, wheat, and corn, other plants give variety to our meals.
- d) Corn is an important grain that comes from the Americas.
- e) Most of our meat comes from two great grain-producing countries, the United States and Argentina.
- f) Rice yields more food from each acre than any other grain.
- g) More corn grows in the United States than in any other country.

Perhaps the most difficult exercise, but the one which seemed to challenge our students the most, requires the reader to match topic sentences to the correct paragraphs. As in the sample article, the reading is presented to the student with the topic sentences deleted. The topic sentences are listed on another sheet (Exercise IV). The student has to read the specific information of each paragraph and then decide which topic sentence best introduces or summarizes that information. He has to add the topic sentence to the original. In this way, the student actively participates in building the paragraph. Subsequent exercises (e.g., adding facts, matching topics, answering questions, comprehension checks) depend on the entire article, the topic sentences the student has written in plus the specific facts given. As a result, this exercise is not done as an end in itself, but is seen as having added significance as a necessary step for further activities.

Exercise V. OUTLINING

(A)

Great Food Regions of the World

I. Introduction

II. Rice

A.

B.

III. Wheat

A.

B. The big wheat-growing regions

1.

2.

3.

4.

C.

(Etc.)

(B)

Great Food Growing Regions of the World

I.

II.

A. Yields more food from each
acre than any other grain

B. Is grown year round in Asia

III.

A. Covers more land than any
other grain

(Etc.)

Outlining activities fall naturally into the area of general topics and specific facts. Given a skeleton outline with all the general topics filled in (A), the student supplies the specific facts. Conversely, the outline (B) can present the specific facts and the student provides the general topics. An outlining exercise can also be prepared by randomly deleting every fourth or fifth item regardless of whether it is a general statement or specific fact. Subsequent outlines should contain increasingly higher proportions of deleted items so that the student outlines with more and more independence. (N.B. If students are unfamiliar with outlines, other kinds of classification activities should precede these reading-outlining activities)

In order for students to realize that an outline is a functional tool which serves to capture the overall organization and content of an article, they must use their completed outlines. Using only the outlines, for example, students can re-create the original in writing (i.e., writing from notes). Each student can be responsible for orally presenting the information from one section of the outline to the class (i.e., speaking from notes). Students can be allowed to use their outlines during a comprehension check (i.e., studying from notes). If the quiz takes place several days after the reading class, the students are even more impressed with the contribution of good notes to successful performance on exams.

Testing Comprehension

A teacher may be interested in keeping a progress chart for the students or at least in providing them with periodic feedback on their reading. There are a variety of ways to check comprehension, each of which tests performance under a different set of conditions.

First, the reading can be timed or untimed (or, limited or unlimited). When students are being timed, they tend to force themselves to read faster; untimed they tend to read in what they consider to be a more careful fashion. Second, the comprehension check can also be timed or untimed; that is, students can have as long as they need to work through the questions or they can be given only a limited amount of time.

Third, the comprehension questions can be answered either with or without reference to the passage. So, for example, students may be allowed to refer to the original during a timed comprehension check. The student who makes use of principles of organization to remember where particular information is located, even though he cannot remember the specific

details, will be able to find the information fast and answer the questions correctly. On the other hand, the student who always starts from the beginning in his search will not be able to do so.

Fourth, students can see the questions before they read, and then take the comprehension check after reading the entire article. Or students can underline and read the topic sentences, see the questions, then read the entire article and answer the questions. This latter design tends to put the most emphasis on anticipatory reading.

Finally, students can read, take notes, and then answer the questions referring to their notes but not to the original selection.

These five variables can be combined in a number of ways. For instance, notes can be permitted when the reading is timed so that students will have time to jot down only the most essential facts. On the other hand, if students need a confidence-building experience, the teacher can run an untimed reading and comprehension check allowing the students to use the article while answering the questions.

Conclusion

I have presented some aspects of reading which can serve as organizing principles for an academic-oriented reading program: intensive and extensive reading, efficiency and comprehension, organization of materials, and general reading skills. Next, the exercises on reading for general ideas and specific facts are offered to prove it is possible to create skills-based reading exercises for low-level college-bound ESL students. On the basis of our experience with this reading program, I would argue that reading skills are not simply a matter of practice but that they can be taught and developed. These skills need not be postponed until the

intermediate or advanced levels. I suggest that reading should be an integral component of the ESL program from the very beginning.

APPENDIX

Great Food Regions of the World¹

Three grains-- rice, wheat, and corn-- are the world's most important food plants.

...

In part of Asia, there is a warm, damp climate where rice can grow the year around. Asia grows more rice than any other part of the world. Everything depends on the rice harvest. When an Asian has no job, he often says that his rice bowl is broken.

...

It grows in many parts of the world and covers more land than any other grain. But the big wheat-growing regions are in the United States, Canada, Russia, and Argentina. Fields of ripe wheat look like gold in the warm summer sunshine. Flour ground from this wheat is used to make bread.

...

Corn is sometimes called maize. In many Indian villages of South America, corn is the main food. In these villages, corn planting and harvesting are times of prayer and festival. In the high mountains of Guatemala, Indians carry their seed corn to the church to be blessed before they plant it. When the corn is ripe and ready to be gathered, there is a festival. The festival is a time for fun. It is a time for singing and dancing. But it is also a time to give thanks for a good harvest. Unless the corn crop has been a good one, many of the people will be hungry in the winter.

...

And most of it grows on farms of the Midwest. So much corn grows there that people of the Midwest are often called 'corn-fed.' The Midwesterners

eat corn, but the animals of the region eat more corn than the people. Hogs and cattle are fattened on corn and then are sold for meat.

...

Sugar cane and sugar beets give us sugar. Nuts grow in many parts of the world, both in tropical climates and in cool climates. Fruits like bananas and pineapples grow only in tropical climates, but many fruits grow in temperate climates, too. Apples grow best in a cool climate. Grapes grow best along the Mediterranean shores, in parts of Argentina, California, and in other places with a mild climate.

...

Catching fish is one of the oldest ways of getting food. Today many people make their living by fishing or by preparing fish for market. Most of the best fishing grounds are in northern waters. Salmon and cod are caught along North American shores. Norwegians fish for herring and the little silver fish called sardines. And each year Dutch fishermen sail out in June to fish for herring. Japanese fishermen sail in many waters. Modern fishing fleets make big catches in the more important fishing grounds. And all over the world, people in tiny villages still get their fish in nets close to the shore.

...

In these two countries great herds of hogs and cattle are fattened for market. The cool, damp climate of the Netherlands grows fine grass for dairy cattle. The Netherlands is famous for butter and cheese and other dairy products. Usually countries do not grow animals for meat unless they produce enough grain to feed them. But a few countries, like Denmark, buy grain to feed their hogs and cattle.

With the rapid increase in the world's population, the great food regions will have to produce more every year.

¹

The National Council of Teachers of English, English for Today, Book Three,
(New York, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964), pp. 44-45.